

THE FUNCTIONS OF A STATE BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS*

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A SURVEY of the work of bureaus of vital statistics would show that registration of births and deaths is the principal, if not the sole, statistical function of most bureaus in the United States. A recent decision of the Supreme Court of Georgia declared unconstitutional the attempt in that state to pay local registrars from county funds, because it held that the collection of such data was not essential in providing "necessary sanitation." No member of this Association would hesitate an instant in affirming that vital statistics are indispensable to progress in public health.

Can it be that in the enthusiasm for securing universal registration of births and deaths in the United States, the importance of vital statistics in measuring local sanitary and hygienic conditions has been neglected? It seems timely to consider whether the expenditure for the collection of vital statistics in a state is a "necessary sanitary" measure.

From the beginning, registration of births and deaths has been coupled with an analysis of the returns to determine causes and trends of mortality. Newsholme says¹ in regard to the origin of registration in England:

"The first London Bills of Mortality were compiled in the reign of Henry VIII, about 1538. Their weekly resumption in 1603 was caused by the desire for information as to Plague, which was then prevalent. Thus Plague gave an impetus

to vital statistics, just as the first invasion of cholera in 1831 hastened the establishment of national registration of deaths."

The researches of Captain John Graunt (1620-74) in "Natural and Political Observations . . . upon the Bills of Mortality," show that these Bills of Mortality were almost immediately subject to analysis for whatever light they might throw upon the trends of mortality.

The one man associated with the establishment of registration in England was William Farr. To him registration was only a means to an end.

Early utilization of the death registration of Massachusetts by Lemuel Shattuck, in the *Report of the Massachusetts Sanitary Commission* of 1850 and by E. B. Eliott in the construction of the first Massachusetts Life Table in 1857 showed the local sanitary value of those records. Notwithstanding this beginning, there has been in the United States a tendency for state bureaus of vital statistics to focus attention principally on the collection of records of births and deaths.

This tendency is explainable partly from the fact that there is no federal constitutional provision for registration of births and deaths. National vital statistics awaited each state passing and enforcing registration laws. With the establishment of a registration area for deaths in 1880 and permanent provision for the same in 1902, the immediate objective has been the securing of complete registration. One by one, states have

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been admitted, until it is hoped that 1930 will see all states in the registration area.

Since the price of complete registration is eternal vigilance, the major efforts of each state bureau of vital statistics have been and always will be devoted to this activity. On the other hand, the time has arrived when it has become feasible, desirable, and indeed urgent that proper provision should be made for analysis and full utilization of these data by states in order to meet the needs of rapidly developing local health organizations. The position of the bureau of vital statistics in most states as an integral part of the health organization implies such a function. State and local health officers need and expect to secure advice as to the evaluation and distribution of their efforts.

In the past, many states have relied on the federal mortality statistics for tabulations of the data collected locally. It is desirable for a single agency to edit and classify causes of death so that they may be comparable in all states alike. Such a common agency has helped tremendously in securing uniform procedure in registration and certification of causes of death. The rapid growth of the registration area has limited the amount of detail which can be presented in annual tabulations and consequently, for most distributions, the state has been the unit of tabulation in census mortality reports. While this unit may be satisfactory for national comparisons, it fails to meet the needs of state, city, and county health officers for detailed analyses of local data. The tabulations of the Bureau of the Census should therefore be supplemented by such additional tabulations as will bring out groupings which are locally useful, and by analyses which are locally significant.

To be concrete, the unit for health work in most states is now recognized as being the county. The increase in the number of full-time county health units has been rapid during the last 5 years. No bureau of county health organization

can function properly unless it is furnished constantly with not only the actual mortality from various causes in each county but a critical study of the trend of mortality in individual counties and groups of counties.

The bureau of county health organizations needs this information; first, to present to groups of people in counties contemplating health units, and second, to present to appropriating bodies later for measuring results achieved. To be of value these studies must be based not on a single year's experience, but on an experience covering a long period of years. (In passing, attention is called here to the fact that studies in this field are seriously handicapped by the fact that the federal census does not publish age statistics of county population even in broad age groups. Action should be taken in this section towards insuring such publication for the returns of the next, 1930, census.)

Other bureaus of the state health department require analyses of state mortality experience according to local groups. The work of the bureau of maternity and infant hygiene in determining and relieving the hazards of child-bearing and infant life cannot be effective without such studies. The bureaus of epidemiology, tuberculosis control and others have just as great a need for them.

The report of the Committee on Educational and Professional Standards for Vital Statisticians last year called attention to this need of more detailed analysis of vital phenomena by state bureaus of vital statistics. It is apparent that the time has arrived when each state should make adequate provision in funds and personnel for the proper analysis and investigation of mortality trends and other movements of its population in such detail as to make the data locally useful. It is poor economy for a state to have an elaborate system for the collection of vital statistics and then provide no means for utilizing the data thus gathered in promoting the development of public

health activities. No factory would install an elaborate set of records for cost accounting and then not furnish the accounting bureau with the facilities and personnel to analyze the data thus secured.

The collection of vital statistics in the United States will be on a vastly sounder basis as a necessary part of health work

when state registrars make adequate provision, as well, for analysis and interpretation of these data so that they are locally useful. There will then be no question as to the "local sanitary significance" of vital statistics.

REFERENCE

1. Newsholme, Sir Arthur. *Vital Statistics*, 1923, p. 23.

DISCUSSION BY G. A. THEILMAN

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As the basis of vital statistics stands the earnest, wide-awake, sincere, industrious, broad-minded, philanthropic doctor. His profession is fraught with sacred obligations. No career in all human activities rises above the realm where he holds sway. He deals with man directly. He yearns to keep him fit. He studies the human mechanism in all its wonderful intricacies so that he may put it in order when thrown out of adjustment. He is the coworker with God keeping the master-creation in trim to function happily.

The doctor is man's guardian through all the stretch of life between birth and death. The physical body flourishes under his direction and care, thereby not only making possible all material progress but also insuring the development of every phase of spiritual growth of which the soul is capable. To accomplish his tasks, to fulfil his mission, he entertains no fear; he spares no pains; he quails before no obstacles. He ministers to all; the rich and the poor, the cultured and the uncultured, the high and the low, are all benefited by his helpful care and timely advice. No matter how dangerous or infectious the disease he falters not but strains every nerve to save the suffering. He foregoes all pleasures, misses his meals, throws aside his cherished plans, breaks his much needed rest, and sacrifices his own conveniences and comfort for the sake of alleviating the suffering of his patient.

Such a doctor is a benefactor and truly realizes his exalted station. For 15 years, since the law for the registration of births and deaths has been enacted, he has carefully, promptly, and regularly made out birth and death certificates and seen that they were punctually delivered to the local registrar. The division of vital statistics wastes no time worrying over such a doctor. His services are a blessing in keeping the records and a boon to all concerned.

He fully recognizes the value of recording births and deaths and sympathizes with the people who need the records.

THE VALUE OF VITAL STATISTICS

Under the influence of such doctors the public is rapidly learning that registration affords a compact and convenient history of every human life, guarded under lock and key in our state capitol. Every business, profession and social organization seeks these valuable records. They form the working machinery that stimulates man's activities. Every hour these annals are anxiously consulted under strict legal direction.

The courts pause in the midst of their rushing duties; insurance companies withhold their funds; the government turns a deaf ear to the just pleadings of widows and orphans; and multitudes are denied their rightful ownership until the birth and death records clear the way for action.

The certified copy clerks are constantly busy sending out copies of birth and death certificates to all who request them and gladly pay the required fee of 50 cents.

The urgent need of these certificates is clearly evident. They prove the legality of heirs, the right to make contracts, to be admitted to the professions, and to hold public office. They determine your right to vote, to marry, to enter school, to settle insurance, and to receive pensions. They furnish evidence for enforcing laws concerning education and child labor, relations of guardians and wards, the obtaining of passports, and the exemption from or the right to jury and militia service. They are used for probating wills, settling estates, establishing the facts of heredity and ancestry, protecting your citizenship and proving your nationality.

The patriotic, hard-working doctors of our great state who take pride in complying with the law know well that these certificates serve